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SUBJECT: ANTWERP THE CITY OF DIVERSITY: TWO OBSERVERS  
COMMENT ON THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Classified By: POL/ECON Counselor Richard Eason for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶11. (C) Summary: Poloff met with two activists of Moroccan descent in Antwerp January 14 to get their readout on how local government engagement with the Muslim community and a readout on the January 4 demonstrations against Israel which became violent. The Antwerp police detained about 90 youth between the ages of 11 and 20 for questioning after the violence erupted. The two interlocutors were Hicham Al Mzairh, a frequent op-ed contributor and member of the Flemish Liberal Party (Open VLD) and Anissa Akhanda, Director of the Antwerp City Social Cohesion Office. Al Mzairh explained that the two largest Muslim nationalities in Antwerp, Moroccans and Turks, rarely interact with each other, and in his view, Muslims are only one component of a diverse society that includes 160 different nationalities. Akhanda described her offices' effort to engage individuals, organizations, and neighborhoods of all minority groups and sectors of society including Muslims. In the case of the rioting youth, she posited that the majority were disaffected teenagers born in Belgium to Moroccan immigrants, who have turned to radical Moroccan leaders that can provide them with an identity, pride, and self esteem. End Summary.

¶12. (C) Hicham Al Mzairh is a well-known writer of opinion pieces critical of Muslim extremism in Belgian papers. Most recently, he condemned the violence during the January 4 anti-Israel protests, and shook hands with leaders of the Jewish community who felt threatened. "They call me a traitor," he said, when mentioning how he is often condemned by Belgium's Muslim leaders. Al Mzairh immigrated to Belgium ten years ago from Morocco and has learned to speak both Flemish and English fluently. His main source of income is the salary he receives as an Antwerp City bus driver. He is an activist in the local Liberal Trade Union, and a member of the Flemish Liberal Party (Open VLD). He is often quoted or featured in the media as the Open VLD point person on Muslim issues in Belgium. Al Mzairh emphasized that Antwerp is a large diverse community with 160 different nationalities, rivaling the mix of New York and London. Though he often involves himself in Muslim-society dialogue, he believes the larger community is more important and more valid to him personally than the Moroccan Community. He noted that the largest ethnically Muslim communities, Moroccans and Turks, have little interaction with each other. He estimated there were only two officially recognized mosques in Antwerp that receive some government support out of about 36 total. The remainder he said were either Turkish mosques receiving funding from Ankara, or mosques that were too radical to receive government support and therefore maintained by tithes and donations. He chose to speak out against the violence during the demonstrations to admonish those disrupting peace and cohesion in Antwerp; he reached out to Jewish leaders to show solidarity with an important part of a diverse city like Antwerp.

¶3. (C) Anissa Akhanda, a second generation Belgian of Moroccan descent is the Director of the Social Cohesion Office in the Antwerp City Department of Living Together in Diversity. The Department was created by the city council in 2007 to promote integration within the city and its diverse communities. She has a large staff, which includes four teams dedicated to: community participation and mediation; focus group organizations; individual citizen projects; and neighborhood square activities. The community participation and mediation team works with grass roots groups and ethnic communities to smooth problems between various groups. This team is often deployed in the city and provides a large amount of intelligence at the street level on the local mood and opinion. If they determine a particular issue could cause violence, they communicate with the police and city authorities as necessary. Anissa is a member of a large and important family in Antwerp's Moroccan community. She said her office is well aware of the situation that led to the violence in the January 4 demonstrations. She was disheartened to point out it was mostly young boys between 11 and 20 who were detained by the police for questioning. She added that the large majorities of Moroccans in Antwerp are second or even third generation. A clear problem with many children of Moroccan descent is their feelings of disenchantment and loneliness within the wider society, which is easily exploited by outspoken and sometimes radical leaders who claim to provide them with a "Moroccan" or "Muslim" identity and self esteem. A part-time teacher of Arabic, Anissa said that few children of Moroccan descent can speak Arabic in Antwerp. Her office is working hard on outreach to these disaffected youth, trying to engage them and their parents. She opined that very few parents even

knew their children attended the demonstration. They have also increased their contact with Moroccan leaders and some mosques. Her office was warned to limit interaction with radical or extremist leaders, and she requested objective bureaucratic criteria to define what specific indicators they should use to define overly radical. She is concerned that if their contact with some of these leaders ends, they will lose the opportunity to engage and reach their youthful followers.

¶4. (C) Comment: Hicham Al Mzairh and Anissa Akhanda are examples of moderate Muslims who have fully integrated into modern society. As activists, they set examples for others in Antwerp and Belgium. Al Mzairh's individualist and often critical discourse might earn the ire of Muslim leaders, but his focus on the wider community might help other Morocan immigrants expand their views outside their ethnic community.

Akhanda, as a public servant promoting diversity, is in a particularly good position for outreach to Muslim communities in Antwerp. She acknowledged the need to focus on disaffected teenage youth after the recent anti-Israeli violence, and she has the kind of personality and drive that lead to success. These two Belgians, of Moroccan descent clearly believe and are willing to work to ensure that Muslims have a place in a diverse Belgian society.

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